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Creating a User Centered Environment...What DO Our Patrons Want?

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TLA 2009 Conference Program Abstract: Libraries have often been criticized for making policies that are library-centric. How can we reach out to patrons to provide services and create the policies that *they* need and not just what *we* want.

For the Lead Desk Services Librarian at Appalachian State University's Belk Library, the topic of creating a true user centered environment is ever present. Belk Library experienced reorganization in January 2007. Most of the changes restructured Access Services and Reference & Instruction. As an outgrowth of that reorganization, the Lead Desk Service Librarian position was created to lead the team in a redevelopment of services for three public service desks: Reference, Circulation and the Lower Level Desk. With this mandate, the task of melding traditional reference services with traditional circulation responsibilities was a priority. This task involved cross training staff and faculty for new tasks at various service points.

Due to the fact that this was a new position, the role of the Lead Desk Service Librarian could develop the job from scratch. The bad news? This was a new position, so the role of the Lead Desk Service Librarian could develop the job from scratch! Part of this position developed into becoming an advocate for patrons by communicating their needs and developing services to meet their needs.

One of the first approaches employed was to find superior examples outside of the "library world" to see how patron needs were met as consumers. Consider a huge discount store like Wal-Mart. As a consumer, some of the things that are wanted and expected are:

- Courteous treatment
- Staff that are attentive, listen and will do their best to help
- Policies that are easy to understand
- Physical arrangement that makes sense
- Staff that are well trained and can find answers
- Disputes are dealt with in a satisfactory manner
- Clean and attractive environment
- Friendliness

Why should library users expect anything less? Even in the information environment, it is a competitive market so libraries must prove their viability in this information-rich world. Confessionally, oftentimes librarians mistakenly think patrons are “captive audiences” (especially, it seems, in the academic library environment) and forget that patrons are consumers (of information in all forms). What can be learned from the commercial world and how should these lessons be applied to libraries, especially in an academic setting? There are six steps on how to transform lessons learned from outside the library world to the library environment:

1. Take lessons from outside the “library world”
2. Create a clear vision and mission
3. Mold an internal “Customer Care Policy”
4. Find better ways of communication
5. Reprogram traditional thinking
6. Assess what is done

First, take lessons from outside the “library world” from commercial enterprises that “do it good!” One regional example is Ukrops grocery stores in central Virginia. If one has ever lived or traveled in or near Richmond Virginia, the Ukrops name is equal to outstanding customer service. Ukrops is a locally owned and operated family business that grew out of the Richmond area. Ukrops not only provides groceries to its customers but also has a bank, a pharmacy, a dry cleaner, a coffee bar and a café inside its doors. The café was even once touted as one of the best places for singles to meet! It is truly one stop shopping. It is the premier grocery store in the region and people in Richmond love it. What makes Ukrops unique is that it boasts a loyal following in Richmond. This loyalty is evident despite the fact that Ukrops is not open on Sundays (Note: they are devout Baptists) and that the prices are 10-20 cents higher on many items than their competitors. Why does Ukrops command a following? It all boils down to their attitude about customer service and what they do well six days out of the week. Their commitment to their customers and to their employees is self evident and it shows. Ukrops provides scholarships for their employees to continue their education. Employees are recruited out of high school. Ukrops will work with a student’s hectic schedule and often times pay for some of their expenses. This allows them to work until graduation. Often times, this same high school recruit will enter Ukrops’ managerial program.

For their customers, Ukrops provides superior quality customer service. Instead of directing the patron to aisle six when asked where the olives were kept, the Ukrops associate continues by “That will be on aisle 6, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down, on the top shelf beside the mushrooms” and then they add “but let me show you where they are!” Ukrops further outlines on their web site their

vision, their purpose and what they value [1]. This is as important to the customers as it is to the employees. Too often, libraries forget what their guiding principles are and it helps to be reminded of them. Some of Ukrops key phrases noted on their website can also be applied and adopted to the library environment.

- We're a chain of grocery stores. But chances are, we're unlike any other supermarket you've seen. We're not just here; we're here to help. Just come into any of our stores. You'll find friendly faces and caring attitudes. . . . [What this means is]...treating every person, customers and associates alike, with the utmost respect.
- We promise to keep adding more and more services in our stores, to make life a little more convenient for our customers.
- [And this last point really was poignant...] Our list of Team Values, Business Commitments, and Leadership Principles, (all that you see here)...honors our past and will guide us today and tomorrow in a constantly changing marketplace and world.[2]

Ukrop's is but one example of the kind of user centered environment that libraries should strive.

Second, while keeping these commercial models in mind, libraries must have a clear vision and mission outlined in order to develop this kind of user centered environment. In recent years, it seems that libraries have copied successful vision and mission statements from examples in the commercial world. At Appalachian State, the library mission is very simple and is posted for the public on its web site. ASU's mission is "to assist those who pursue knowledge" [3]. The message is extremely simple but deceptively so! The vision is a little more direct:

The Appalachian State University Library is a dynamic partner in the campus and distance learning communities, dedicated to the provision of full and equal access to information and the preservation of our intellectual and cultural heritage. Our collections, portals to information and text, services, and instruction contribute to the campus missions of learning, scholarship, engagement, and effectiveness. Our vision is to broaden the learning experience, to encourage creativity and scholarship at all levels, to deepen the campus engagement with the community and world, and to develop an effective organization that can meet current and future information needs. These areas of learning, scholarship, engagement, and effectiveness are our four strategic directions. [4]

In planning ASU's strategic plan, the strategic planning committee was committed to making it a living and breathing document and not just a piece of paper to place on the web site or stick in a binder to collect dust. Third, libraries must create a customer care policy. Through a series of late night brainstorming sessions (a.k.a insomnia), the seeds for a customer care policy were sown for Desk Services at ASU. Currently, there are five pillars to this customer care policy [5] which are still under development:

Disconnect to Connect

Or, Be approachable! It is discouraging to see some of the ASU student assistants buried in the computer, a book or even their homework when someone approaches a service desk. Unfortunately, student assistants are not alone in disconnecting from patrons. Even when

approachable, sometimes there is a mental disconnect with patrons... staff minds wander to the next question, the line forming behind the patron being served, or even what they are having for lunch that day, etc. “Disconnect to connect” means to give each and every patron a staff member’s full attention.

BE the definition [of customer service, of course].

The Golden Rule plays largely into this pillar. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!” Things that should be obvious are often lacking in customer service interactions.

Watching vocal tone, and even remembering to smile can mean the difference between a bad customer service interaction and a good one. Most importantly, learn when to pass a question on to another if one does not know or cannot give that patron a satisfactory customer service interaction.

Make every interaction unique

The longer one works in a public service environment, the more chances they are to become jaded. Personally, I have worked in academic libraries for 16 years. Working in public services, I have heard every excuse, complaint and suggestion. The trick is to make every interaction as if it were the first interaction. Take time with that patron and leave your ego, prejudices and problems at the door...even if this patron is considered a “problem patron” by some! Make that patron feel like they are the only person in the world. The library world gets all excited about using Library 2.0 applications in patron service, but when did we forget Library One-To-One? To make every interaction unique, staff must really listen. Patrons know when someone is “faking it.” Also, do not assume what someone is going to say because “you are doomed when you assume.”

Err on the side of leniency

This is one of the hardest for some to embrace. The traditional view of public services was as “protectors” of the collections and following the letter of the law. Today’s user-centered library strives to provide open access to collections and follows the spirit of the law. At ASU, Desk Services is trying to embrace and lead others to adopt a much less punitive approach to policy. If there are patterns of dispute, it is a clear indication that there may be policies that need to be changed. Better to be fair to all than fair to none! It is time for libraries to ponder the questions “How long have our policies been in place? Are the same policies in place since they began working at the library? Why do we have the policies that we do... and are the policies still relevant for our clientele today?” Even when policies are enforced, it is more important to give a patron options and the manner in which these policies are interpreted. Patrons are much more inclined to accept a policy if they see that the staff member is trying to help them in all ways possible. There is nothing more infuriating to a patron says “Sorry... I can’t help you” and nothing more.

View every moment as a “teaching moment”

It may be cliché but patrons appreciate the time spent with them. Take the time to teach someone and they will not forget the kindness.

Fourth, Communicate with users. So often, services and policies may be based on how it impacts staff rather than users. Communication with patrons is essential. One of Desk Services

goals this year is to develop more vehicles of communication with patrons. This allows a vehicle to assess needs in real time and allow patrons to be a sounding board for feedback. There are many ways in which to do this whether through traditional means (i.e. email, focus groups, surveys) or through more contemporary technological means (i.e. Facebook, blogs, polls, Twitter, etc).

How does one change traditional ways of thinking and become a more user-centered environment? Here are some suggestions:

- Think “enabler” not “disabler” (a.k.a. Don’t be the barrier)
- Make policies that are easy to understand
- Have a physical arrangement that makes sense and is clean and attractive
- Train staff so that are well trained and can find answers
- Satisfy disputes satisfactorily
- Be Attentive
- Be Friendly
- Treat patrons and each other courteously

Sounds eerily familiar to what is expected from commercial consumers! The Library World can take cues from successful businesses. Libraries must do this because they are no longer the only information brokers out here. Here are ways that ASU has changed their way of thinking in order to become a more user-centered environment:

Changes in Policy/Procedures, Or... no Policy is sacred!

Policy Before	Policy Now	Planned Policy Future
Only Graduate Assistants could check out periodicals for a 24 hour period	All Graduate Students AND undergraduates can check out periodicals for a 48 hour period	
DVDs and VHSs circulated for 1 week for faculty (limit of 5), 3 days for students (limit of 3) and community borrowers (limit of 1)	DVDs and VHSs circulated for 1 week for faculty, students (limit of 10), and community borrowers (limit of 3)	For Faculty, the loan period will be increased to 2 weeks.
Browsing collection circulates for two weeks, no renewals	Browsing collection circulates for two weeks, 1 renewal	Browsing collection's loan period will be increased to 3 weeks, 1 renewal.
DVD/VHS replacement costs = \$520.00	DVD/VHS replacement costs = \$60.00	
All fines were posted to patron accounts amounting over \$1.00	All fines were posted to patron accounts amounting over \$5.00	
Laptop/charger fines \$5.00 each for the first hour overdue (even if a minute late)	Laptop/charger fines \$5.00 each after a fifteen minute grace period.	
Group Study Rooms are “booked” by staff at the Circulation Desk		Group Study Rooms are self “booked” via the Library Catalog.
No Fax Service Available in the Library	Mediated Fax Service available in the library for a charge.	
Back issues of newspapers retrieved by Periodicals staff – closed collection	Back issues of newspapers are self serve for patrons.	

ASU has made a good start but are not nearly done. Future plans may include:

- Creating a centralized “print center”
- Establish a visiting scholars room
- Developing “slick” brochures
- Redesigning policy/procedures web pages
- Re-evaluating more policies
- Re-envisioning Ref/Circ Services
- Creating a community borrower/“Friends” membership
- Training staff in more meaningful ways

And finally, assess what we do. Changes cannot be deemed successful or a failure unless they are assessed. This can be done through things such as surveys and focus groups. At ASU, one of the best barometers for services is to ask student assistants. They are an invaluable part of the team and will give candid feedback.

One concern: “How can I do these things during the current economic downturn?” The good news is that many of these changes can be done with a minimum amount of work and little or no money. And, just because everything planned cannot be accomplished as quickly as one would like does not mean it will not eventually be done. With the support from administration and buy in from staff, anything can be accomplished.

In conclusion, the advice to be learned from this article is to stay focused on what can be done now and plan for more changes to come. Creating a user centered library boils down to this:

- Stay relevant
- Be essential
- Anticipate needs
- Take time to teach
- Don’t be the barrier
- Don’t be afraid to change a policy

And most of all... Be fearless!

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